Introduction to Reading like a Writer by Steve Peha

Reading Like a Writer vs. Reading Like a Reader

What do readers do when they read? Sounds like a strange question, doesn’t it? After all, readers just read, don’t they? Sort of. Actually, the whole question turns on what you think reading is.

Your mind is very active while you process text. You may think you’re just saying words to yourself and hearing them somewhere inside your head, but chances are there’s more going on — a lot more. Becoming aware of what your mind is doing when you read helps you become a better reader.

Nobody knows for sure what goes on in the mind of a reader. Frankly, there’s no way to tell and no two readers read exactly the same way. So, we have to make up a theory about it. I like to think that there are two different ways to read:

- **Reading like a reader.** We might think of this as the “normal” way of reading where we try to figure out what a piece of writing means by understanding the words a writer is using. But even this “normal” way is more complicated than it seems.
- **Reading like a writer.** When we read from the perspective of a writer, we focus less on what the writer is trying to say and more on how the writer is saying it. Specifically, we look at the techniques the writer is using to get his or her message across and how those techniques affect us as we experience the text.

These certainly aren’t the only ways to read. But I think they represent interesting and valuable ways of thinking about a text. The point of all this is to help us tackle complex texts by making it a more active and interactive process. When we read actively, we don’t just wait for the meaning to come to us, we go after it — aggressively. We look deeply into the text hunting in certain specific ways searching for clues as to what the writer is trying to say. When we read interactively, we ask questions about the text and our reactions to it, and we use the answers we develop to get a sense of how the text works. It’s as if we start a conversation between the writer, the writing, and ourselves.

Reading Like a Reader

What’s going on here? Personally, I find teaching reading to be rather intimidating because I can never really know for sure how students are doing it. I can look out across a classroom and see a group of kids with their faces buried in between the pages of their books, but I have no way of knowing what’s really going on. For all I can tell, they could be sitting quietly, thinking about nothing, and turning pages just to make me feel good.

There’s no way to know for sure what goes on in a reader’s head. And every reader probably reads a little differently. But here’s a list of six things I think all readers do, things that make them more successful, and make reading more fun. I call this “reading like a reader”:

- **Question.** Readers ask good questions about the things they read. What kinds of questions do they ask? Just about anything that comes to mind: why something is happening or not happening, why a character feels or acts a certain way, things we wonder about or are confused by, words we may not know the meanings of, and so on. Questions help readers clarify their understanding.
**Predict.** Readers make guesses about what is coming up next. No reader, it seems, can resist thinking about what a writer is going to say next. It's just part of human nature to anticipate things. Predicting helps readers sort out important information from unimportant information, it helps them organize their thinking as they encounter new material.

**Infer.** Readers figure out things about what they read that aren't actually written in the text. There's almost always more to a story than just the words on the page. Often, writers leave “clues” that good readers can use to discover important information.

**Connect.** Readers think about what their reading reminds them of. We can't help but be reminded of our own lives as we read. We're also reminded of similar things we've read in other texts and other parts of the same text we're reading at the time.

**Feel.** Readers have feelings while they read, they express emotions. Sometimes, it seems like we have a direct connection to what we're reading: sad parts make us feel sad, happy parts make us feel happy, scary parts scare us, and so on. But often, the feelings we have are more subtle, we may feel them only slightly, for example, when we read with more expression. Much of the meaning we get from a piece of writing comes from the emotions we feel when we read it.

**Evaluate.** Readers make judgments while they read. Is this good? If so, what's good about it? Do I like it? Why? Should I keep reading or should I put this down and get something else? Readers are finicky, impatient, judgmental. The evaluations they make help them decide whether or not what they are reading is valuable and, if so, how they might use it.

**Reading Like a Writer**

There's another way to read? Normally, when we read, we focus on what the writer is trying to say. When we read like a writer, however, we focus on HOW the writer is saying it. Because we are writers ourselves, we pay close attention to the techniques a writer is using and how those techniques contribute to the meaning of the piece and improve its quality. We may even borrow the techniques we learn for our own writing. I call this “reading like a writer.” When we read like this, there are six things we pay attention to:

**Ideas.** Ideas are the heart of the piece — what the writer is writing about and the information her or she chooses to reveal about it. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer reveal the main idea? What types of details does the writer use? How does the writer achieve his or her purpose? How does the writer's choice of ideas affect the reader?

**Organization.** Organization refers to the order of ideas and the way the writer moves from one idea to the next. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: What kinds of leads does the writer use and how do they pull us in and make us want to read more? What kinds of endings does the writer use and how do they work to make the writing feel finished and to give us something important to think about? How does the writer handle transitions? What techniques does the writer use for sequencing? How does the writer control pacing?

**Tone.** Tone is how the writer conveys his or her emotions and feelings to the audience. It's the expression of the writer's individual personality through words. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer demonstrate passion for the topic? How does the writer reveal emotions? Does the writer's tone remain consistent throughout the text or does it shift to emphasize the author's change in feelings or perspective about his or her topic?
**Word Choice.** Word Choice refers to writer’s selection of particular words and phrases to express ideas. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: What techniques (simile, metaphor, strong verbs, etc.) does the writer use to make the word choice more specific, more memorable, and more effective?

**Sentence Fluency.** Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language as we read it, it’s how the writing sounds when read aloud. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: What kinds of sentence constructions does the writer use? How does the writer vary the length and construction of his or her sentences? How does the writer use “sound” effects like alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm?

**Conventions.** Conventions are the ways we agree to use punctuation, spelling, grammar, and other things that make writing consistent and easy to read. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer use conventions to make the writing easy to read and more meaningful? Does the author use conventions in unusual ways that are successful?